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# The Air Force Worked Too Fast

Presidential counselor Edwin Meese III personally handled details launching President Reagan's campaign to sell AWACS radar planes to Saudi Arabia, showing Reagan's commitment to what is best for U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf despite Israeli objections.

An earlier rescue mission by Meese might have prevented the disarray between the State and Defense departments. The clash between Secretary of State Alexander Haig and Gen. David Jones, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, almost blew up the AWACS package before it was tied. As it is, the administration still faces an uphill climb to win Senate approval.

Shortly before noon on April 21, Meese placed a conference call to Haig and Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger to plan Reagan's kickoff statement later that day. Meese's personal involvement resolved doubts about Reagan's own intent to make Saudi Arabia a full partner in protecting the Persian Gulf oil jugular.

Meese also helped draft the statement in Reagan's name, declaring that sale of the five airborne radar ships was "essential to protect our interests." That contradicted the authoritative memorandum published by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which mirrors Israel's views, that the sale "will seriously endanger American interests."

Jones (an Air Force officer) and Air Force generals had negotiated the AWACS deal in detail in late March after a tentative go-ahead from the National Security Council in mid-February. Secret negotiations were conducted in the Pentagon with two top Saudi air force commanders.

Why did Jones rush the sale? For one thing, with Saudi Arabia completely lacking high mountaintops for fixed radar, Jones wants the Saudis to have their own AWACS for future 24-hour surveillance of one of the world's most strategic regions. For another, the \$1 billion to \$2 billion price of the five sophisticated AWACS is money saved by the Pentagon that would otherwise be spent, making the deal a budget bonanza.

When the NSC met on the subject for the second time April 1 (without the hospitalized president), Haig was astonished to learn that the AWACS deal had been concluded. So was Vice President George Bush, presiding over the NSC in Reagan's absence. Bush asked Weinberger: Have we gotten assurances that the Saudis will pool their information with us (when the AWACS are deployed in 1985)? The answer: No!

Obtaining such approval was the State Department's job, but so rapidly had the Air Force negotiations been conducted that Haig's men were left behind. Word flashed through Congress that Saudi Arabia, America's oldest friend in the Middle East, had not agreed to "pool" the vast intelligence expected out of the AWACS. The Israeli lobby had new and telling ammunition.

When Haig returned from the Mideast 10 days later, he brought private Saudi assurances to pool the surveillance product of the five AWACS. More than that, Haig brought back strong indications that, although the Saudis would never admit it publicly, the five aircraft plus 62 F15s previously sold along with other American military aid would, in fact, give the United States a greatly enhanced presence in the desert kingdom. Thus, the deal was clearly in U.S. interests.

But if the AWACS were not sold because of a congressional veto, all would be transformed. Haig was cautioned with typical Saudi circumlocution that the kingdom would quickly cool its ardor for the long-standing American partnership.

When Haig reported these facts to Reagan after his return here, congressional opposition to the sale was beginning to peak. Thanks to Davy Jones' end run, none of the lobbying work normal in such cases had been done. The speed of the Air Force brass in completing the deal outpaced the ability of the politicians to keep up.

That handed the president a dilemma. To change his mind about the AWACS would bring the beginning of the end of the U.S.-Saudi alliance, a fact not disputed by military or diplomatic specialists here. But to affirm the sale officially would trigger severe political opposition, more from the pro-Israel lobby here than from the Israeli government.

Haig, Weinberger, CIA Director William Casey and Bush all argued that Reagan could not let Israel wield a veto on U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. Strongly agreeing with them was Meese, who had taken a leading role in the April 1 NSC meeting. At the end, Meese summed up the essence of the session while Bush and other members listened.

Reagan himself showed no doubts about proceeding, nor self-deception about the political trouble he now faces in avoiding a congressional veto. But down deep, the president believes that, after a delay of a few months, he can persuade Congress that he knows more about America's "interests" in the Persian Gulf area than Israel does.